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Developing Space: Slum Growth and Withering Institutions of Social Control in Venezuela

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Abstract*– deutsch –*

In Venezuela, einem lateinamerikanischen Rentierstaat, stieg die Zahl der Totschläge pro 100.000 Einwohner von 11 im Jahr 1983 auf 44 im Jahr 2002. In meiner Dissertation wird untersucht, warum sich diese signifikante Steigerung der sozialen Gewalt nach den 1970er Jahren ereignet. Zu diesem Zweck wird eine Analyse der Beziehung zwischen Slumentwicklung und dem Wichen von Institutionen der sozialen Kontrolle vorgenommen werden. Dieser Artikel beschreibt den konzeptionellen Rahmen um diesen Kausalzusammenhang zu beleuchten. Die Hypothese meines Forschungsvorhabens ist, dass der rasante Übergang in die Moderne (die Land-Stadt-Migration) eine normfreie Zone entstehen ließ. Der Artikel endet mit der Überprüfung der vorläufigen Methodik, die in meiner Dissertation die oben genannte Hypothese zu negieren oder zu bestätigen sucht.

– englisch –

Venezuela, a Latin American rentier state, went from experiencing 11 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 1983 to 44 in 2002. My dissertation project examines why this significant increase in social violence took place by analysing the relationship between slum development and the withering of institutions of social control in the country after the 1970s. This article however only discusses the conceptual framework behind the dwindling of institutions of social control. The hypothesis of this article (and that of my dissertation) is that a Durkheimian anomic gap was fomented in the Venezuelan slums because transition to modernity (rural-to-urban migration) did not allow recreating institutions that promoted norms of social interaction, which reduce the possibility of violent conflict between people. It concludes by reviewing the tentative methodology that will be applied in my dissertation to confirm or dismiss the aforementioned hypothesis.

Introduction

The Caribbean country of Venezuela has seen its homicide rate quadrupled during the period of 1983 to 2002. The Venezuelan homicide rate, measured as the number of intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, rose from 11 in 1983 to 44 in 2002 (Briceño-Leon 2006: 319). In recent years, the country's homicide rate has been amongst the highest in the world and is higher than in the conflict-ridden nation of Iraq (Leon 2010: 3). My forthcoming doctoral dissertation explores the causal link between the often-overlooked spatial relationship between the development of informal urban settlements – commonly referred to as slums – and the formal city after the 1970s.¹ I argue that in the space of urban slums rent-financed growth caused the negative performance of institutions of social control over the last three decades, which explains the rise of social violence. In this piece however I would primarily focus on discussing the conceptual framework behind the dependent variable of my ongoing research and its spatial dynamics.

Social violence is found with greater intensity in urban centres. The homicide rate in Caracas, the Venezuelan capital, is twice the rate of the national average (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: 2013).² The high presence of poverty is an often-cited cause mentioned in the current literature accounting for rise of violence (DiJohn 2005: 108-10; Sanchez 2006: 178-180). However, the Venezuelan capital possesses less impoverished inhabitants – only around 21% of its inhabitants live below the poverty line – than small Ve-

nezuelan countryside populations. These small population centres, which are those that possess less than 25,000 inhabitants, show an absolute poverty rate of around 61% (Gonzalez 2005: 114). The development of the urban area in the Venezuelan context could account for the rise of social violence. While these dynamics are context specific as in many other countries such as Egypt, Nicaragua, or Peru, slum growth has not resulted in high social violence. I argue that in the Venezuelan context the specific growth of slums in an oil-based economy has withered traditional institutions of social control (forthcoming).

Slum Development

Before discussing the conceptual framework behind the withering of institutions of social control in Venezuela it is important to briefly discuss the dynamics of rented slum growth. The relationship between informal settlements known as slums and the formal city in Venezuela is a contrasting one. The slum and the formal city have a difficult interaction and problematic cohabitation processes. A slum is not characterised by its appearance, the defining factor can be rather found in its relational dynamics to the formal city. The inhabitants of a slum are not fully integrated in the economic and social life of the city (Stokes 1962: 188).

This means that although slums are not part of the formal urban centre, they are neither considered as a part of the rural areas. Slums are pseudo-cities in the margins of a formal city (Leon forthcoming). It is important to note that it was rural-to-urban migration that caused the creation of these informal settlements. In many third world countries, including Venezuela, rural-to-urban migration took place in the second part of the 20th century. Once rural migrants arrived in the city they became slum dwellers instead of city dwellers because they did not have the necessary skills to integrate into the urban economy. Rural

1 My doctoral dissertation is as of date entitled *The Political Economy of Violence in Venezuela* and is being developed at the Institute of Political Science of Leipzig University, and supervised by Prof. Dr. Heidrun Zinecker.

2 The latest comparable with available statistics was 2009. That year the UNODC reported that the homicide rate in Caracas was of 122 per 100,000 inhabitants, while the national average stood at 49 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.

economies are labour intensive because they are overwhelmingly dependent on primary sectors, such as agricultural production. On the other hand, urban economies are capital intensive because they rely primarily on the service sector. One has to keep in mind that urbanisation in the third world during the 20th century was different from urbanisation in that of the first world during the 18th and 19th century because it was not driven by the process of industrialisation (Cornelius Jr. 1969: 833; Lipton 1977: 58; Stokes 1962: 190).

In first world cases, primarily Europe, industrialisation-driven urbanisation allowed for the integration of the rural migrants since industrial jobs are labour intensive. In Europe the new city dwellers of the 18th and 19th century were able to find formal employment in the industrialising cities and they had the possibility to generate savings (Marx/Stoker/Tavneet 2013: 187–189). The possibility of savings accumulation is what allows for investment in what is usually the only resource available to rural migrants: their own labour. This means investing in their education, nutrition, health, and housing unit (Frankenhoff 1967: 29). This process did not take place in many third world countries during the 20th century. Venezuela was of course no exception. In fact, the economic structure of this Caribbean country increased the inability of rural migrants to accumulate savings in the city, thus making them slum dwellers (Leon forthcoming).

Venezuela, a major oil exporter, fits the rentier state model formulated by Giacomo Luciani and Hazem Beblawi (1987: 12).³ Dependency on oil windfalls produces detrimental macroeconomic effects such as the “Dutch disease.” This effect renders the labour intensive sectors of an economy, such as agriculture and manufacturing, internationally uncompetitive by overvalu-

ing the local currency, which encourages imports over domestic production. Also, it overheats the domestic economy with inflationary pressures because oil rents create demand without supply (Auty 1993: 3–5). Therefore, in a rentier state income rises due to inflation, because of the large amount of money being pumped into the economy by oil windfalls. This encourages rural-to-urban migration since migrants are encouraged by the perceived prospects of higher income rather than the real possibilities of acquiring high-paying employment (Torado 1980: 364). Naturally, formal employment falls in cities located in rentier states such as Venezuela because labour intensive industries are crowded out. Thus, the ability for savings accumulation by the incoming rural migrants is severely hindered, which does not allow for their integration into the formal city and turns them into slum dwellers (forthcoming).

Furthermore, it is in the spatial category of the slum where social violence has developed and became Venezuela’s number one concern (Moreno 2009: 869–870; Fox/Hoelscher 2010: 6; International Crisis Group 2009: 6). My doctoral dissertation will test one main hypothesis, which is why the growth of slums has withered traditional institutions of social control brought by rural migrants to the city (including, but not limited to, the family, the school, and the church), which removed normative controls on human behaviour (Leon Forthcoming). The following section will expand on the conceptual framework behind institutions of social control and the process that leads to its dwindling.

The Withering of Institutions of Social Control

Institutions of social control are those that create what Robert Putnam termed social capital, which are the social networks that foster trust and cooperation within a given community. Social capital is a fundamental element that allows for the in-

³ Venezuelan oil revenues constitute well over 8% of GDP, more than 40% of total exports and more than 40% of the national budget.

ternalisation of social norms that regulate human behaviour (Putnam/Leonardi/Na-netti 1993: 167; Putnam 1994: 6–9). The aforementioned institutions are termed as “traditional” because they existed in a rural setting. One could expect that these institutions would transfer along with the rural migrant to the new urban setting and continue their role of imparting normative controls over human behaviour. However, in the Venezuelan case the transition to modernity (referring to rural-to-urban migration) did not allow for these traditional institutions to be carried over and achieve their role of creating and enforcing social rules and norms that interrupt violence.

Karl Marx (1969) and Max Weber (1930) explained that the transition to modernity is always disruptive of traditional institutions. Modern social scientists have identified that the reason that this transition is disruptive is because in a modern (i.e. urban) environment social relations are no longer based on nepotism because people are exposed to a much greater number of non-kin. Therefore, a successful transition to modernity involves the rebuilding of social networks that are composed by large number of individuals with no kinship ties (Newson/Richerson 2009: 130). European societies were able to successfully transition to modernity because nation-state formation allowed for new social capital to replace traditional social norms, which allowed for social cohesion and normative institutions to remain present (Fox/Hoelscher 2010: 3–4). My dissertation argues that in the Venezuelan transition to modernity the independent causal variable – rent-based urban development – inhibited redeveloping new social capital in the informal settlements, and thus new institutions of social control.

As Norbert Elias explained, nation-state formation in Europe allowed for a trickle down of norms of social behaviour dictated by the interaction of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This means that an independent civil society interacts at

the socio-economic level under the spatial framework of the nascent nation-state (Fox/Hoelscher 2010: 3–4). In a rentier state however, an independent civil society is not present because the different social classes have a clientelistic relationship to the state and not a mutually beneficial interest-based one between them (Ross 2001: 327–328). A civil society requires a market economy where intensive capitalist growth takes place in order for the bourgeoisie-proletariat interaction to take place as an independent socio-economic agent. This cannot take place in a rentier economy because demand does not result from surplus value of proletariat production created out of bourgeois investment, but from the distribution of natural resource exports. In other words, rents create demand without supply, which does not allow for intensive capitalist growth to take place (Zinecker 2007: 9). Thus, a civil society that can generate social capital is unlikely to form. Many rentier states, such as those found in the Middle East, have not been able to develop independent civil societies due to the above-mentioned process, but this has not resulted in heightened social violence rate. One can speculate that the transition to modernity in the Middle Eastern rentier states did not significantly alter traditional institutions that generated social capital. This speculation is made because in these cases, and unlike the Venezuelan case, social disorganisation, the opposite of social capital, is not apparent.

Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay (1942) explained that their empirical research showed that precarious environmental conditions did not allow social networks of cooperation to rise to a significant level where they could create normative controls on human behaviour. Social disorganisation engenders what Emile Durkheim (1960: 343) referred to as the state of anomie, which is a state of normlessness resulting from an abnormal social division of labour where social soli-

darity (trust and cooperation) and cohesion cannot develop. Modern sociologists argue that slum-dwellers suffer from an “anomic gap” since they live in pseudocities where social capital has not properly redeveloped (Cornelius Jr. 1969: 833–834).⁴ This increases the likelihood that violence will be used as a conflict resolution and market access tool because social disorganisation decreases disincentives against violent crime (Ehrlich 1974: 70–71; Rosenfeld/Messner/Baumer 2001: 286–287). However, the theory behind the above-mentioned hypothesis needs to be empirically tested in order to back the theoretical framework discussed in this piece.

An Inconclusive Conclusion

Many scholars have tried to explain the dramatic rise of social violence in Venezuela.⁵ What makes my study novel is the focus on the social, political and economic dynamics in the development of the Venezuelan urban space. In order to prove, or disprove, the above-stated hypothesis, the theory needs to be tested against empirical findings. The tentative methodology to accomplish this goal is the study of slum growth in the three most violent Venezuelan cities with more than one million inhabitants. These three metropolises are

Caracas, Guyana City, and Barquisimeto.⁶ Adding rural-to-urban migration, the natural rate of increase and the growth – or lack thereof – of the non-rentier economy from 1970 onwards would quantify slum development (Leon forthcoming). Then, these findings will be qualitatively correlated with the (under)development of institutions of social control during the same time frame. This will be achieved by analyzing their effectiveness through expert interviews, community leader interviews, and institutional case studies. I will focus formal institutions of social control – such as the educational system, the church, and public institutions.⁷ Employing the described methodological and theoretical framework, I will be able to test the relationship between rent-financed urbanisation and withering institutions of social control as the cause for the rise of social violence.

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4 Emile Durkheim (1960: 343) explained the concept of the state of anomie as normlessness. This means a period of time, within a given space, where social rules do not govern and regulate men's actions.

5 Violence, as a complex social phenomenon, is of course caused by multiple factors. In the Venezuelan case many scholars have tried to attribute deterministic explanations to the genesis of violence that include, but are not limited to, structural adjustment programs, the high availability of small arms, the international cocaine trade, and demographic dynamics (Leon Forthcoming). However, all of these variables are certainly intervening factors, but not necessarily deterministic ones in the specific context of Venezuela. In my dissertation I explain in greater detail why causality cannot be attributed to these variables.

6 The reasoning behind the choice of Caracas is obvious as it is the capital of the country, and its most populous and violent city. Guyana City is the only major city built during the country's rentier era, and it has showed the same contradictions as Caracas, such as the rise of slums and violence. Last but not least, Barquisimeto is not only Venezuela's second most violent city, but also a prominent provincial metropolis. Its analysis should compare the dynamics of slum development and the withering of institutions of social control in an urban centre that is not the administrative hub of the country (Leon forthcoming).

7 I will refrain from an in-depth analysis of the family as a significant institution of social control, as this would require a longitudinal analysis too extensive for a single dissertation project. Further studies into this topic can and should focus on this important aspect in more detail.

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